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Chile: Liberalization Sparks Opposition Activity

As the Pinochet regime moves cautiously toward granting greater political freedom, Chile's opposition groups have begun to test the limits of government tolerance.

The Christian Democratic Party (PDC), the regime's chief critic, has recently increased its activities. Over a hundred members of the party's youth movement were arrested last week for unlawful assembly, distributing PDC literature, and chanting provocative slogans. The youths--most of whom were subsequently freed--clearly had the approval of former President Eduardo Frei, who has become more assertive since he openly demanded the restoration of traditional freedoms last summer. Opposition elements in the church, labor, and universities also have become restive. For example, students at three universities recently were suspended for a variety of unauthorized activities.

Increased dissidence is the outgrowth of the regime's steps toward greater freedom. Last summer the government adopted a comprehensive labor code allowing the resumption of labor practices prohibited since 1973--including strikes and collective bargaining--under carefully controlled circumstances. The government is determined, however, to prevent a return to the highly politicized labor activity of the 1960s and early 1970s, when leftists dominated the movement. In order to undercut the power of the old leftist labor bosses, the code disqualifies former union chiefs from leadership positions. It also decentralizes labor by forbidding the formation of multiunion federations. The government is reasonably satisfied that the strikes and the rounds of contract bargaining that have taken place under the new system so far have been within bounds, but it continues to watch the process closely.

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In another liberalization move, Santiago is permitting public debate on the draft of a new constitution. When portions of the nearly completed draft were leaked to the press, the Group of 24--composed of moderate regime critics--issued its own proposed constitution, which calls for considerably broader personal and political freedom than the government text. The regime is anxious to keep criticism within manageable bounds, but it had promised a public discussion of the constitution and has not silenced its critics for fear of drawing accusations that it is imposing a constitution on the country. Instead, it is trying to drum up support for its version. Interior Minister Fernandez has held at least one meeting with leading center-right politicians for this purpose--one of the most significant political openings in the regime's six-year history. [REDACTED]

Nonetheless, broadening political participation, while continuing to deny a voice to those the regime regards as irreconcilable enemies--the PDC and the left--remains a dilemma that can be expected to grow more serious as the liberalization process continues. The regime has not decided how far and how fast to move, but the government and its opponents are probing each other's intentions. Should dissidents grow more vocal in coming months, the strength of the government's commitment to political decompression will be tested further.

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